

HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Fiscal Year 2008

Membership

James Wald (Chair and representative to Comprehensive Planning Committee)
Lynda Faye (Vice Chair and representative to Design Review Board)
Gai Carpenter (Secretary)
Louis Greenbaum (representative to Community Preservation Act Committee)
Lyle Denit (representative to 250th Anniversary Committee)
Michael Hanke
Elizabeth Sharpe

Jonathan Tucker, Staff Liaison

We note with sorrow the recent passing of two former members, who served the Commission and the community in many ways:

Paul Norton: author of *Amherst: A Guide to its Architecture* (Amherst Historical Society, 1975) and the *Guide to the Dickinson Historic District* (Amherst Historical Commission, 2005)

and Caroline Olson.

Synopsis

Although, in this past fiscal year, we dealt with our usual share of demolition delays, consultations on design changes, and the like (all of which are documented in our minutes and the records of the Planning Department), the most significant achievement was the start of a fundamental reappraisal and reorientation of our action items - the most radical overhauling of our agenda that has taken place in the past five years, and one that will shape our policy in the years to come.

Major Accomplishments and Activities

This year, we proposed and succeeded in obtaining CPA funding for several key initiatives: a grant to the Amherst Woman's Club (Leonard Hills Mansion) for restoration of a carriage house; continuing work on conservation of Town documents; and, most controversially, purchase of two frontage lots on Main Street, in front of the former Henry Hills Mansion, next to the Woman's Club (see below).

We moved from planning to action on several of our long-term agenda items. We received and approved the East Village Historical Study, produced by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission with CPA funds (originally FY 05). In particular, we tackled some of the central goals in the restoration of the 1730 West Cemetery: We hired a firm to begin the delicate work of headstone restoration on the oldest portion of the site (\$150,000 in CPA funds from FY 05). Streetscape improvement by the Department of Public Works has at last reached the northern end of East Pleasant Street, which will allow renovation of the entrance to the Cemetery as well as

installation of new signs and lighting for the adjacent Amherst History Mural to go forward (originally from FY 05). We are also in the process of developing a request for proposals for production of new historic site and wayfinding signs (originally FY 05).

In addition, we collaborated with the citizen-advocacy group Preserve UMass (PUMA) in an attempt to stop the destruction of buildings and other historic resources on the University of Massachusetts-Amherst campus. It was in fact the thoroughness of State register listings based on data that the Commission had compiled in recent decades that allowed PUMA to bring successful action against the University of Massachusetts and University of Massachusetts Building Authority. The Massachusetts Historical Commission granted the Amherst Historical Commission standing to participate, along with other interested preservation organizations, in the negotiation of a binding Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on future policies toward historic resources on the Amherst campus.

The above are significant accomplishments, but our duties and ambitions are considerable, and we find that we are in many cases fulfilling them later than we would prefer.

Policy Reappraisal

The guiding document for the Amherst Historical Commission is the *Amherst Preservation Plan* of 2005 (<http://www.amherstma.gov/index.asp?NID=765>), developed with Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds following the success of our *West Cemetery Preservation Plan* (1999). It divides undertakings into physical preservation, documentation, regulation, and outreach and advocacy, which are further distributed over a ten-year schedule, divided into near-term, mid-term, and long-term goals.

One of the first consequences of the *Plan* was our creation of a rolling five-year schedule of proposed undertakings and expenditures under the CPA, subdivided into: Capital Projects, Interpretation/Outreach (e.g. signs), Research and Planning (e.g. Historic Register nominations), and an Annual Set-Aside (e.g. for preservation restrictions or archaeological surveys at construction sites and the like). The model in many ways served us well, paying for, notably, restoration work in the West Cemetery and conservation and digitization of Town records held in Town Hall and the Jones Library, to cite but two examples.

However two factors forced us to revisit and reconsider our overall policy. One was contingent, and one structural, but they are in fact closely related. The contingent factor was a string of unanticipated and urgent preservation challenges entailing use of CPA funds (virtually our only source of monies for projects, the occasional grant excepted). The structural factor was a system entirely dependent on the volunteer labor of citizen commissioners and the professional services of Town staff already stretched to their capacity (a situation exacerbated this fiscal year by vacancies in the Planning Department). Because the emergency cases allowed for no delay, they served to highlight the cracks and strains in the “normal” system.

In 2005-6, we scrambled to save the Federal-era Benjamin Kimball farmhouse at 575 North East Street from demolition, which triggered not only considerable ongoing expenditures but also protracted - indeed, tortuous - negotiations between multiple Town offices and commissions, on the one hand, and the Commonwealth, on the other, over mitigation and compensation for the necessary trade-off of land under Agricultural Preservation Restriction. In fall of 2007, we

acceded to the Town Manager's request to support by vote and with our CPA funds, repairs to the exterior of Town Hall and debt service on the restoration of Town Hall exterior masonry.

In early 2008, we launched a struggle to save two Main Street lots in front of the Henry Hills mansion (former Boys' and Girls' Club) from development. The division of the latter parcel into building lots threatens to destroy part of a rare contiguous nineteenth-century urban landscape that is moreover one anchor or gateway of the Dickinson National Historic Register District, our premier concentration of historic resources, crucial to the character of our community. We proposed that the Town acquire the parcels in order to create a historic landscape park. This was the first occasion on which the Commission advocated outright purchase of a property, simply because there were no alternatives. As in the case of the Kimball farm, though for different reasons, even our solution to the problem was severely hampered by legal restrictions: In this case, the developers were asking more for the lots than their appraised value, which is the legal maximum that the Town can pay. We therefore had to assemble a multi-step proposal, entailing allocation of CPA funds contingent on receipt of a State grant with a tight application deadline, and ultimately, on private fundraising efforts (in which we are not legally allowed to take part) to generate the \$90,000 in bridging funds between the appraised and putative market prices. (The results of the grant application will not be available until around mid-October, and even assuming that it is successful - as we have every reason to believe- we do not know how long the developers will wait before they feel the need to put the lots on the market to recoup their investment. We anticipate, however, that the window would not close before the end of the calendar year.)

All these cases required considerable capital expenditures outside the mandate of the *Preservation Plan* - which our established policy strongly discourages: They consume an inordinate share of financial resources - in the case of the Kimball House and Town Hall, not just for the fiscal year in question, but for several years out. For each of three years in a row, the need to respond to an emergency that monopolized both CPA funds and the time of commissioners and staff has played havoc with our ability to act on the carefully calibrated schedule of projects that the *Plan* sets forth.

If there is a silver lining to this cloudy picture, it is that the string of emergencies forced us to examine our regular projects in a new light. After rigorous comparison of our history of proposals and our actions, we reached the sobering but unavoidable conclusion that, under the constraints of time and money within which we had to work, our existing model was unsustainable in the long run. Even assuming that no such similar large-scale emergencies arise in the next few years, we would be hard-pressed to accomplish all that we hoped. We faced the choice between persisting in a neat but unrealistic program that looked excellent on paper and had produced notable accomplishments but fell further behind schedule every year, and crafting a new one that achieved steady and predictable results. We opted for the latter.

All of our goals were worthy and mandated by the *Preservation Plan*, but they were, after all, an ideal or a wish list: many proved to be infeasible at the moment or inadequately prioritized, or both. We therefore began a period of reappraisal that will extend into the new fiscal year, and should be completed by Spring Town meeting, when the next round of CPA articles will come to a vote.

We discussed in some detail the time factor and considered various ways to obtain the additional project oversight and assistance that we believe we need. No matter how productive and

dedicated the commissioners, we are dependent on the expertise and authority of professional Town staff. One of the prime challenges for the work of the Commission is the need for most projects - especially capital projects - to negotiate the bottlenecks of the bureaucracy. (The West Cemetery improvements - for which CPA funds were allocated in FY 05, but which are being completed only now - are "Exhibit A.") Any undertaking requiring the collaboration of other departments or the satisfaction of Town-wide design or quality standards necessarily takes more time for planning and execution. Any major undertaking involving the services of outside contractors requires the preparation of a professionally rigorous request for proposals, followed by competitive bidding, both of which, again, take additional time. The solution seems to lie in the careful choice of the new Associate Planner to be hired in the fall. If, as seems likely, that position is defined so as to include support for the work of the Commission, then we will stand a much better chance of making more effective use of our respective time and expertise. A more careful division of labor, including the enhancement of standing subcommittees and the creation of new ad hoc ones, should follow.

Future

Our provisional goals for the coming fiscal year are all derived from the "Immediate Preservation Efforts (One to Three Years)" called for in the *Preservation Plan* of 2005:

- First and foremost, complete the process of creating local historic districts (a distinct category under Massachusetts General Law), which offer the strongest form of protection for historic structures and landscapes. Indeed, had such legislation been in place in the appropriate parts of town, we could have avoided several of the recent emergencies that have so consumed our time and resources. Although this was the number-one regulatory goal of the *Preservation Plan* ("Establish a Historic Overlay District"), the Commission never took any concrete steps toward its realization. This June, we arranged a joint meeting of the Amherst and Pelham Historical Commissions, at which a representative of the Massachusetts Historical Commission explained the complex process, which we plan to launch in the fall.
- Complete work on West Cemetery restoration and improvements. To date, we have tackled infrastructure and interpretation, but not yet the long list of landscape restoration measures.
- "Play a leading role in the 250th Anniversary of the Town." In addition to collaborating with the Anniversary Committee, History Museum, Chamber of Commerce, and other organizations on special events, we hope to link our most prominent preservation activities to the celebration.
- "Develop, install, and maintain a system of signs and street furnishings to mark historic districts and village centers, and to encourage tourism." This is part of a multi-pronged effort to develop an aesthetically unified complex of wayfinding and interpretive signs. It can also be linked to the longer-term goal of creating a historic plaque program, whereby property owners could purchase commemorative markers for their buildings, the fees for which would help to support a revolving fund to provide grants and loans for local preservation projects.
- "Create a web page linked to the Town's website" to make available historic resources as well as information on programs and other events. This dovetails with the priority task of updating our inventories of historic structures and landscapes. The redesign of the Town of Amherst web

site (scheduled to go online shortly after the transition to the new fiscal year) provides the perfect opportunity.

- An additional goal that has arisen outside the parameters of the *Plan* is to ensure the proper conservation, and if possible, public display of the G.A.R. tablets (1893) honoring our Civil War Veterans, in time for the 250th anniversary celebrations.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Wald
Chair, Amherst Historical Commission